

**The Social Origins of Rebellion:  
Toward a New Quantitative Research Agenda**

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**Abstract**

Quantitative approaches to conflict research are evolving to incorporate better theoretical, methodical, and dataset tools. One key area where our progress is especially limited relates to the social origins of rebel groups: how a group's political identity emerges as a focal point for mobilization and future conflict behaviors. We benchmark two key empirical agendas in civil war and rebellion research and then discuss key contributions of this special issue. In bringing together multiple theoretical perspectives and original datasets, including the individual-level and group-level data, the contributions to this special feature push the research frontier further along these lines. Jointly, they demonstrate that a rebel group's origins – where it comes from, who are its constituents, what is its political appeal, and how it organizes – have far-reaching implications to explanations along different dimensions and across a wide range of contexts and regions.

Civil war<sup>1</sup> remains a major affliction in many countries across the globe. By some counts, the post-Cold War era, alone, has experienced more than 230 civil wars, across at least 150 locations, and 54 active wars have been recorded in 2019 alone (Pettersson and Öberg 2020). These wars cause death, economic hardship, and instability for millions of people. They invite international intervention and the escalation of conflict between countries (e.g., Regan 2002; Salehyan 2008; Kathman 2010). In an effort to help promote a more peaceful world, scholars have endeavored to understand why wars occur and how they end. Over the past several decades, quantitative research on civil war has boomed, facilitating new understandings on the causes and consequences of conflict. These understandings are primarily built on theories and analyses that explore a rebel group's motives, opportunity, and inability to peacefully bargain with a government.

Surprisingly, though, while *qualitative* research has highlighted the importance of social origins of rebel movements—i.e., the role of ethnic, religious, and social ties in shaping group structure and organization (e.g., Parkinson 2013; Staniland 2014; Sarbahi 2014; Larson and Lewis 2018)—the *quantitative* research program on civil war tends to abstract away from these foundational aspects of opposition groups. As discussed in detail in the Key Concepts section, by “social origins,” we refer to two dimensions of the interpersonal and geographical context in which a group's political identity emerges as a focal point for mobilization and potential future conflict behavior. Here, we focus on both the interest of the group's constituents (demand) and what the rebels can provide to address this demand (supply).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this special feature, we use the terms “civil war,” “civil conflict,” and “rebellion” interchangeably.

In this special feature, the authors emphasize that failing to incorporate the social origins of opposition groups is problematic because it reflects a systematic bias in our understanding of why rebel groups come to be and, subsequently, how they function. For our purpose, there are three relevant aspects of this bias that this special feature seeks to address: (i) improving the empirical connection between grievances and opportunity and how their intersection leads to rebel formation, (ii) explaining why some groups are more effective at recruiting than others, and (iii) better tying the circumstances of the group's origins to their impact on conflict outcomes. The purpose of this special feature, then, is to bring the role of rebel group social origins to the fore in *quantitative* conflict research and to highlight different aspects of how social origins impact conflict processes, including not only the onset and termination of warfare, but also recruitment and group formation, which precede active fighting, and are often not analyzed in extant quantitative research.

Accordingly, we begin this special feature introduction by providing definitions relevant to civil war research and this special feature. On the basis of these definitions, we discuss this feature's key contributions. Our focus on the origins of rebellion allows us to pinpoint key factors that might matter early on in the conflict and promote a conversation about the behavior of such groups at their earliest stages, with an emphasis on why some groups fail and some succeed when waging conflict against the state. We combine different theoretical perspectives and original datasets, allowing the contributions to this special feature to push the research frontier further along several axes. The contributions to this feature also apply a variety of methodological approaches, including statistical analyses, network-based models, and case studies across different levels of analysis, ranging from the individual (recruits and volunteers) to the group level, ensuring a diverse representation of relevant methodologies.

Jointly, these contributions demonstrate that a rebel group's origins – where it comes from, who are its constituents, what is its political appeal, and how it organizes – have far-reaching implications to explanations along these four dimensions and across a wide range of contexts and regions. Briefly, they identify selection factors determining the disposition of a group toward violence in rural areas; illustrate the centrality of urban areas to rebel group formations; explore the importance of social and religious networks in facilitating group mobilization and recruitment; and link group origins with ultimate conflict outcomes.

Overall, our conclusion is that where a rebel group comes from is crucial in shaping its behavior, and therefore the broader trajectory of the conflict. As we discuss in the concluding section, for policymakers, this agenda provides tools to identify and address nascent civil war before the state is faced with the reality of mobilized rebel armies in hard-to-reach locations.

## **Key Concepts**

The last two decades have seen a plethora of empirical civil war and rebellion research. A thorough review and assessment of this literature is beyond the scope of this introductory article, although readers interested in a review of the research facets discussed here will benefit from consulting some of the studies cited throughout this introduction and in the other articles of this feature. Here, we provide our working definitions of civil war onset and termination, rebel formation, concessions, and social origins, while setting aside other important dimensions of these conflicts, such as individual participation and support in rebellion (e.g., McDoom 2014; Thomas and Bond 2015; Matanock and Garcia-Sanchez 2018), tactics used (e.g., Zhukov 2015; Hagerdal 2019; Uzonyi and Demir 2020), third party involvement (e.g., Coggins 2011; Kreps and Maxey 2018; Maekawa 2019), and the aftermath of war (e.g., Annan et al. 2011; Serneels and Verpoorten 2015;

Tellez 2019). In the next section, we highlight how the social origins of rebel groups can expand our understanding of these processes.

### *Onset and formation*

Quantitative research identifies two key general motives for war. The first considers *grievances*, namely how marginalized groups turn to war to address their ethnic, economic, or religious exclusion from the economy or politics (e.g., Kalyvas 2001; Sambanis 2001; Thyne 2006; Houle 2019; Paine 2019), or their horizontal differences in access to power across different populations (e.g., Ostby et al. 2009; Cederman et al. 2011; Bormann et al. 2017), especially in non-democratic countries (e.g., Hegre et al. 2001; Basedau 2016). The second motive-based explanation focuses on the role of *greed*. Here, rebels are seen less as nascent political groups and more as criminals hiding behind the façade of a thin ideology (e.g., Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Englebert and Ron 2004). According to this view, groups challenge the government to capture valuable factors of production or loot natural resources, rather than seek social change (e.g., Albertus and Kaplan 2013; Lessing 2015). Finally, scholars focus on the importance of *opportunity* to engage in conflict, considering that grievances are abundant while wars are (luckily) rare. Here, research highlighted factors such as rough terrain or spatial isolation of the group (e.g., Carter et al. 2019), youth bulges or low life expectancy (e.g., Urdal 2006; Kustra 2017; Fluckiger and Ludwig 2018), the prevalence of natural resources that help lower the “start-up costs” of rebellion (e.g., Fearon 2005; Walsh et al. 2018), weak post-colonial institutions (e.g., Vogt 2018; Ray 2019), or low government capacity (e.g., Herbst 2000; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Koren and Sarbahi 2018).

In developing this framework, these studies tend to make several crucial assumptions and decisions regarding who counts as a rebel group, what is a civil war, and when such a conflict

begins. Onset is typically defined as (i) the first incident in (ii) a campaign that involved a certain number of combatant (i.e., soldiers and active participants) deaths – usually the threshold used is either 1,000 (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003) or 25 (Gleditsch et al. 2002) casualties – and (iii) which lasted a certain amount of time (e.g., one year). In practice, that means that anything that happens *before* this first combat incident or lasts for a brief period of time is discarded. In other words, both the explicit and implicit assumptions scholars use to define civil war shape our knowledge of the groups we study and thus our understanding of when, where, and why war occurs.

Accordingly, in this special feature we make a clear distinction between civil war *onset* – when violence initially happens – and rebel *formation* – namely, the initial founding and organization of the group and its ability to recruit. Separating onset from formation allows us to address the potential selection bias underlying the aforementioned explanations, while better tying grievances and opportunity together, as well as explaining some seemingly conflicting results (e.g., Koren and Sarbahi 2018). Group formation is hence defined as *the first time a group is recorded as active (e.g., as a political organization with some armed capacity, as a recruiting organization), not the first time it has initiated an attack*. As we discuss below, this distinction allows the studies included in this special feature to identify new explanations for rebel group formation, substantiate existing ones, and extend these insights into the conflict bargaining that helps end fighting.

### *Termination and concession*

Relatively strong, motivated groups fight when facing bargaining failure with the government (Fearon 1995; Walter 2009; Thyne 2006; Cunningham 2011; Asal et al. 2016; Kirschner 2010; Bell and Wolford 2015; Kikuta 2019), due to informational problems (e.g., Porat et al. 2015; Lyall 2010; Sawyer et al. 2017) and/or commitment problems (e.g., Thyne 2012; Prorok 2018;

Cunningham 2006; Walter 2009). Accordingly, war ends when the information and commitment problems have been resolved, a side's opportunity for war decreases, or its grievances have been addressed. The integration of these ideas has led scholars to carefully consider how both the insurgents and counterinsurgents can influence the greed, grievance, opportunity, and bargaining problems that drive war, e.g., due to availability of natural resources (Ross 2004; Lujala et al. 2005; Fearon 2005), geographic features (e.g., Buhaug and Lujala 2005; Buhaug et al. 2009), material advantages (e.g., Cunningham et al. 2009), local support (e.g., Heger and Jung 2017), and military asymmetries (e.g., Caverley and Sechser 2017). A group's relative opportunity can fluctuate during fighting as they adopt various tactics (e.g., Balcells and Kalyvas 2014; Thomas 2014; Uzonyi 2023), gain domestic allies (e.g., Akcinaroglu 2012), or attract outside support (e.g., Jones 2017).

While research often focuses on clear civil war outcomes – military victories and bargained treaties and ceasefires – governments can attempt to end civil wars by offering concessions tailored to appease the specific demands of the aggrieved, such as political inclusion, justice for past repression, or land reform (e.g., Albertus and Kaplan 2013). Importantly for our purposes, these demands become hardened in situations in which groups have strong ties to long ignored peripheral areas of the country—e.g., “sons of the soil” conflicts (see Fearon 2004), or the group is comprised of individuals who are true believers in their cause (e.g., Wesintein 2006; Capoccia et al. 2012; Eck 2014), which allow it to continue fighting. Accordingly, the focus on *termination* in this special feature is broad and seeks to cover not only military victories and bargained outcomes, but also factors that *shape* these outcomes and the probability of peaceful conflict resolution. Here, some contributions specifically emphasize the role of *concessions* in impacting the chances of both

peace and conflict intensification, with the aim of establishing how group origins pertain to how concessions may shape these outcomes.

### *Social origins*

In quantitative research, social origins usually refer to ethnic or religious fracture lines within societies, as these can shape civil war dynamics via grievances, greed, and opportunity (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Cederman et al. 2010; Asal et al. 2016; Borman et al. 2017; Carter et al. 2019; Houle 2019; Paine 2019). This special feature takes a more comprehensive view of social origins as defining the nature of the group itself and, correspondingly, its formation, recruitment capacity, and ability to engage in warfare and gain concessions. Accordingly, we view social origins as the political “soil” in which a group grows, and from which it can obtain capacities necessary for fighting.

Here, we focus on two relevant aspects. First, there is the importance of *demand* for the politics offered by the group. If a population within the country has grievances, it is not a given that it will rebel. Similarly, opportunity to rebel without some grievances or greed that provide the willingness to engage in violence is an insufficient explanation. The demand for a rebel group is – we believe – what links grievances and opportunity: groups will form *where* there is demand for their action, and will take such action once they have the opportunity to do so. Considering that there are many types of grievances populations may experience, constituents of interest include not only ethnic and religious communities, but also class, economically excluded populations, urban denizens, and even criminals, as well and the intersection across these different aspects.



Correspondingly, rebel groups can be viewed as arising to *supply* this demand for violent politics. The politics the rebel group supply will hence be directly dictated by the social characteristics of the population(s) it rises to serve.<sup>2</sup> Correspondingly, the rebels' ability to successfully recruit, fight, and gain concession from the government will be defined by how well they are able to continuously satisfy their constituents' demand.

### **The Importance of the Social Origins of Rebellion**

As discussed in the previous section, the authors in this special feature relax these core assumptions about civil war onset and termination, and in doing so, are able to identify new explanations for rebel group formation, substantiate existing ones, and extend these insights into the conflict bargaining that helps end fighting. In particular, the articles highlight how the interplay between motive and opportunity during the formation of rebellion has lasting effects.

For example, using disaggregated data on Islamic State (IS) troops, Edgerton shows that grievances can effectively cross borders. With these new data, he demonstrates that IS volunteers are more motivated to fight in the Middle East by grievances in their home countries rather than in the region and when their sending countries have a higher level of capacity. This both problematizes and informs extant grievance-based explanations – they answer to demand in their

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<sup>2</sup> We recognize that the term “serve” has mostly positive connotations that might not be reflected in rebel group behaviors: in order to satisfy demand for their ideology, groups may use violence to induce compliance, or “import” demand from a completely different world region (e.g., pro-Islamic State groups in Africa). We are accordingly agonistic with respect to *how* groups satisfy demand.

home countries using an opportunity provided abroad. Edgerton's findings are important as they highlight the way in which such structures not only facilitate rebellion onset, but also allow groups that successfully formed to fight more effectively. These groups' greater military capacity, which is directly tied to their social origin story, thereby influencing their chances of both extracting concessions from the government and being able to commit to a peaceful solution.

Uzonyi and Koren also highlight how a group's social origins serve as a linkage between motive and opportunity leading to its formation and later the decision to challenge the government. Specifically, they demonstrate that rebel groups with particular types of ideological supply – political, social, and military-driven – are far more likely to organize where their constituent populations are dense and offer demand for their anti-regime agendas. This means that often rather than simply forming far away from government-controlled areas, as extant theories suggest, these groups buck the trend and organize in cities, especially the capital. Even though government presence is high, in cities they are able to draw on local support most effectively, which ultimately allows these groups to initiate civil war onset in both urban and rural areas. Such results suggest that scholars can better integrate various sources of motive into the opportunity framework to further understand how groups function between their formation and the onset of civil war.

In a similar way, Braithwaite and Cunningham's contribution to this feature provides a relevant analysis of how the origins of rebel groups influence the bargaining process, and in particular the government's willingness to make concessions. As they illustrate, rebel groups emerge from specific communities and organizational structures. These origins shape the rebels' resource endowments (human and material) depending on the pre-existing organizational structure from which they emerged. Through this pathway, the group's social origins at its initial formation thus shape both their motive and opportunity for war. Importantly, these resource endowments are

visible to the government, and they provide critical information about the likely durability of the rebellion, allowing for bargaining to end ongoing conflicts. As such, social origins, particularly with respect to the group's constituents and territory of origin, can help in overcoming a key challenge research has highlighted as crucial for explaining why some wars last longer than others (Walter 2009).

### **Agendas for Future Research**

The articles in this special feature build on new data and a growing emphasis on the importance of socio-political rebel group origins, generate a new set of empirical findings, challenge a number of key assumptions in the field, and highlight new areas for future work. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that – as we have shown in the Key Concepts section – rather than introducing a competitor to previous frameworks to understanding rebellion, we see social origins as the connective tissue between existing theoretical structures. Thus, in addition to introducing many avenues for future research, we believe focusing on social origins helps unify our broader understanding of the politics of rebellion.

A set of key questions that emerge from this collection relate to how existing work can be informed by accounting for social origins. By highlighting the importance of cities in allowing rebel groups whose constituents have primarily urban-issue-related demand to form, Uzonyi and Koren develop an agenda to better explore the role of the urban-rural divide in explaining variability in ongoing civil war patterns and durations. They also improve researchers' ability to connect work on civil war onset with that on ongoing conflicts (as the two are often studied separately). They also provide a new perspective on the potential sources and impacts of urban bias (Kalyvas 2004), whereby such groups might be more likely to get attention, although they

may still start their initial attacks on the governments away from the cities where they formed. By focusing on the motivations of elites to organize in cities, their work helps in elucidating when urban-centric analyses should focus on urban elites versus when such focus can lead to inferential biases.

From a complementary perspective, Edgerton's conclusions about the motivations of international IS fighters raise questions about when such volunteers prefer to travel to fight abroad versus stage attacks in their home countries, and what role grievances in both origin and host country play in the initial stages of civil war. This, again, suggests a more complex picture of understanding why people might fight in civil war, which necessitates understanding not one (i.e., the country in question), but two or more contexts of political supply and demand (the sending country/countries and locations).

Finally, Braithwaite and Cunningham's illustration of the importance of the intersection between resource endowments and the capacity of the rebel group's social base raises new questions about when and where bargaining in civil war is more likely, and which groups are better positioned to take advantage of such opportunities. By tying the conflict termination bargaining dynamics to a set of circumstances that existed before it even began, their findings show that so often path dependence determines how civil war unfolds and to what a significant extent this effect pervades. This has important implications for scholars working on bargaining and civil war termination by showing that it is crucial for such work to account for the group's social origins in explaining conflict outcomes.

Considering that the goal of this special feature is to inform quantitative civil war research in particular, these articles also advance the study of conflict processes by creating new data to bear on existing theory. To this end, two of the articles rely on the recently published Foundations

of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020) to illustrate theoretically relevant ways of working with these data, adding new indicators in the process. Braithwaite and Cunningham, compilers of the FORGE dataset, use this new resource to explore how the assets available in their communities of origin shape the ability of rebel groups to extract concessions from the government during civil wars. They also create new data on the sources of rebel group resources to add to FORGE. Uzonyi and Koren use FORGE to explore the role of urban areas in allowing rebel groups to form, and how this distinguishes such groups from rural-based groups. To do this, they created and added to FORGE indicators measuring whether a group was formed in the capital, in a city (coding three different thresholds), abroad, or in a rural area. Together, both Braithwaite and Cunningham's and Uzonyi and Koren's contributions therefore make important data additions to a key dataset, which will be useful to both quantitative and qualitative scholars seeking to answer new questions on rebel origins and civil war onset or incorporate these data into their analysis of ongoing wars and their termination.

Last, but certainly not least, is Edgerton's study. In order to analyze the determinants of IS joining, this analysis leverages new data consisting of 4,101 individual foreign fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. These data have been coded using information collected from documents captured in the war and have not (to our knowledge) been used in published work before. As such, these data will be very useful to scholars who seek to understand the motivations of individuals to volunteer and fight in civil war, as well as explore the role of grievances and socioeconomic factors in affecting these motivations.

Making these different theoretical implications and data contributions are not the only way the articles in this special feature can help in propelling research forward. Indeed, despite these contributions, far more work remains on different aspects of rebel group origins and their

implications for civil war. One such direction relates to the intersectionality of social origins. As mentioned, Edgerton identifies different ways multiple factors can intersect in affecting the decision of a given group to rebel, and the probability it will do so. But much more work needs to be done in uncovering the types, contexts, and systems that shape interconnectedness across different identity categories and their effect on civil war. Second, the studies in this special feature focus primarily on onset and termination. As a result, much work is left on linkages between social origins on the one hand, and group tactics, conduct, and violence on the other hand. Similarly, while Braithwaite and Cunningham's work explores one particular linkage, further research can explore how origins shape the perceptions and behaviors of third-party states, interveners, and nongovernmental and international organizations.

Other avenues of future research relate to the dynamics and extremities of conflict. One especially relevant area is the determinants of violence against civilians. Previous researchers have linked the dynamics of violence to the rebels' strategic motivations, including overcoming problems of control and information (Weinstein 2006; Kalyvas 2006; Fjelde and Hultman 2014), increasing regime costs from conflict (Hultman 2007; Eck and Hultman 2007; Wood 2014), reducing popular support for opponents (Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004), and securing primary resources (Weinstein 2006; Wood 2010). Some relevant new approaches in this regard would be to analyze how constituent demand or lack thereof incentivize actors to perpetrate violence. For instance, assume a rebel group arises to advance the interests of its constituents against the government using violence, but over time its actions end up alienating its supporters, leading to decreased demand. How might this loss of support shape its use of violence against the government or the civilian population? The framework advanced in this special feature suggests

that rebels may use violence to compensate for decreased demand and the general shifts of their behaviors from their constituents' preferences.

A related research implication relates to the role of sponsoring and delegation. Some studies suggest, for example, that groups that receive sponsorship have less of a need to rely on civilian support, which could induce it to use violence indiscriminately (Weinstein 2006) unless its sponsor predicates support on peaceful behaviors (Salehyan et al. 2014). It is possible that the type of the group's constituency can moderate such behaviors. First, groups that are tied into their social origins may have an easier time sourcing resources and recruits compared with groups that may have arisen in response to a need in one location type (e.g., cities) and then were forced to move onto another (e.g., the countryside) (Sarbahi 2014), forcing the latter to use violence locally to compensate for low demand (Mkandawire 2002). More than that, by shaping the incentives to engage in predatory behaviors, the type of constituents and their demands might moderate (or intensify) the impact of external sponsoring on violence.

### **At the Intersection of Research and Policy**

Finally, this special feature offers lessons that can better integrate research with policy. In particular, each article suggests a more complex picture of the origins of rebel groups, which highlights a new set of "risk cases" where policymakers should look when trying to identify and mitigate the potential for rebellion.

The first relevant lesson is related to the role of political supply-and-demand in rebel group formation. Several of the studies in this special feature find that rebel organizations arise in response to political demand for their services, and where there is supply of recruits and resource support. This suggests that policy focus should be placed on specific communities and populations

that are most likely to actively support the group, or at least approve of its action. Some examples in this regard include situations where populations that lack effective political representation may be vulnerable to potential rebel entrepreneurs, as well as concentrated military compounds and affected social groups. Each of these groups provides potential rebel leaders with strong incentives to capitalize on their capacities and demand for action. Offering alternatives to the supply of violent politics to satisfy demand for a change— e.g., by promoting peaceful civil disobedience within the bounds of the law – can help mitigate the possibility of rebellion. It is important to stress that in many situations, the motivations of rebel groups to challenge the state are legitimate. The emphasis here is hence not on preempting these groups using violent means, but rather identify peaceful early intervention strategies that can decrease the chance of war while still addressing its underlying causes. Supplying effective politics, in other words, is not only the problem, but also one possible solution.

The second lesson relates to the important link between group origins, the conflict's path dependence, and the chances of (peaceful) termination and concessions. Although showing that path dependence is crucial is not a new discovery, in illustrating different ways where social factors that predate the conflict shape its duration and the success of bargaining across a variety of wars and contexts, this special feature suggests ways to improve peace processes' chances of success. Specifically, taking social origins into account can provide relevant information about the group and what it might take to satisfy its constituents' demands for political change. This, in turn, can help to reduce the need for violent supply of politics and helping to overcome some of the bargaining challenges during civil war

For instance, if the type of social origins, which are known to all combatants and observers, can provide useful information and facilitate commitment, this can help overcoming both



information asymmetries and commitment problems before and during peace negotiations. Third parties can be made aware that groups that have greater social endowments will ultimately be more effective at obtaining concessions, meaning they could rely on this fact in brokering peace deals with both social-resource rich and social-resource poor groups. For the former, parties can intensify their pressures on the government to negotiate, emphasizing that such groups are not only formidable, but also that they will be better at committing to a peaceful resolution, and less likely to renege on their promises. For the latter, third parties could pressure the rebel side that the government will be less likely to provide concessions. While more challenging, such third parties could try to broker a demobilization deal, if they are willing to offer some guarantees for the weaker rebels, as suggested by past research (Walter 2002; 2009). As such, in addition to advancing our understanding civil war onset, duration and termination, and raising important questions for conflict and international relations scholars, this special feature provides new ways of thinking about and addressing complex policy challenges.

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